

*Those who
honor the
calling
of righteous
parenthood will
find their souls
refined,
their hearts
purified, and
their minds
enlightened
by the most
important
lessons of life.*



By Elder
Bruce D. Porter
Of the Seventy



Defending THE FAMILY IN A TROUBLED WORLD

Latter-day Saints have been blessed with revealed truths regarding families that remain unknown to the world at large. We understand that the family is an eternal institution ordained by God from before the foundation of the world, with the potential to continue on forever beyond this mortal sphere. Happy, loving families, though imperfect and falling short of the ideal, are the closest thing we have on earth to a small-scale model of eternity, a tiny seed of unimaginable glory to come.

We also know that gender, as declared in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” is “an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.”¹ The differences between men and women are not simply biological. They are woven into the fabric of the universe, a vital, foundational element of eternal life and divine nature.

The family is intended by God as the great entryway into mortal life. It is central to the salvation of the human race, the perpetuation of civilization, and the birth and rearing of each new generation.

PHOTOGRAPH BY APRIL NEWMAN



seem to have lost their bearings when it comes to understanding the vital importance of the family.

This crisis was foreseen and foretold by ancient prophets who saw our day in vision. Their words of sober prophecy and warning are coming to pass before our very eyes. Here are a few such prophecies from ancient scripture:

The Apostle Paul: “This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come.

“For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy . . .

“Lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God . . .

“Led away with divers lusts,

“Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:1–2, 4, 6–7).

The Lord Jesus Christ: “And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold” (Matthew 24:12).

Isaiah: “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (Isaiah 5:20).

We live in a day when the love of many, even toward their own children, is waxing cold; a day when so many people love pleasures more than God; a day when good is called evil and evil good. Those who defend the traditional family, who stand for fidelity and chastity and all that once was considered wholesome and praiseworthy are mocked and ridiculed. On the other hand, those who see no problem with fatherless homes, who advocate abortion, who fight all attempts to limit pornography, and who seek to redefine the very essence of what a family is, are praised and upheld as champions of tolerance. Truly, the world has turned upside down.

In 1920 the divorce rate in the United States was 8 per 1,000 married women; by 1979, it had reached nearly 23, a nearly threefold increase.² It has since dropped slightly,³ but this is likely due to a large increase in cohabitating couples, now an estimated 6.6 million,⁴ whose separations, including from children, are not recorded in official statistics. By many measurements, the United States has the highest divorce rate in the world. Evidence of the toll is that today in America a heartbreaking 40 percent of all births are out of wedlock.⁵

In families more than anywhere else children learn the values, practical life skills, manners, and fundamental truths that enable them to rise up and be successful in the world. They learn the all-important attributes of love, unselfishness, sharing, giving, and hard work that someday will be essential for them to form families of their own and to rear up a new generation in order that the great wheel of life may roll onward. So vital is the family to the cycle of human life and the renewal of each generation that it is fair to say that if the family breaks down, everything breaks down. If families do not fulfill their divinely appointed purpose of carrying on the light of truth and the torch of civilization to the next generation, then we can throw any amount of money or ideas or programs at our world’s problems, and we will assuredly fail.

The Family Is in Crisis

In our contemporary world, in many dimensions, the family is in crisis. The crisis is both *internal* to many families and it is *external* or societal in the sense that many of society’s leaders and opinion-makers increasingly

One consequence of family disintegration has been a rising generation among whom many no longer seek to perpetuate the cycle of family formation that is at the heart of human existence, and for that matter, at the heart of eternal life. Many young people across our nation, who in the natural course of life should grow up, marry, and rear children, are instead trapped in a world where sexual intimacy is casual, responsibility and long-term commitments are denigrated, and children are viewed as a burden, a distraction from the pursuit of happiness and personal fulfillment. They have lost connection with the divine purpose of mortal life, arriving instead at the sterile apex of the me generation.

At least one secular scholar, James Lincoln Collier, recognized the danger of these trends 20 years ago. Collier traces how in the course of the 20th century, selfishness, sexual immorality, and the deterioration of community values damaged America's social fabric. His foremost concern is for the family:

"We have abandoned our children. Between a soaring divorce rate and an equally soaring rate of children born to unwed mothers, it is now the case that the majority of our children will spend at least a portion of their childhoods in single parent homes—in effect being raised without fathers. A large minority will spend their entire childhoods essentially without fathers, and a considerable number will not even know who their fathers are.

"This is an extremely unusual circumstance—perhaps unique in human experience. *In no known human society, past or present, have children generally been raised outside of an intact nuclear family.* The nuclear family is one of the most basic of all human institutions, a system of doing things so fundamental that until this century it occurred to very few people that life could exist without it."⁶

The disintegration of millions of families has taken place in part because popular media and

culture have glorified the pursuit of self: of the wholly autonomous individual unconnected with social or moral obligations, free to pursue whatever ends he or she chooses so long as it does not cause direct physical harm to other aggrandizing selves.

In the mad pursuit of self that prevails in the world today, many believe that they may make up their own rules as they go along, putting on their personal concept of morality or "lifestyle" like a change of clothing. Such is a violation of divine law and as such is doomed to failure. This is what the Lord said of those who seek to become their own law:

"That which breaketh a law, and abideth not by law, but seeketh to become a law unto itself, and willeth to abide in sin, and altogether abideth in sin, cannot be sanctified by law, neither by mercy, justice, nor judgment. Therefore, they must remain filthy still" (D&C 88:35).

Yet the messages we constantly hear in media, entertainment, and advertising sound like this:

"You're number one."

"Do your own thing."

"You're special."

"Find yourself."

Such messages are so pervasive that we unconsciously absorb them and sometimes repeat them. Yet they are diametrically opposite from the message of the Savior, as recorded in similar language in every one of the four gospels: "He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 10:39).

Successful families require that men and women make substantial and long-term sacrifices of their time, money, and personal fulfillment in order to dedicate their efforts to rearing the next generation.



Happiness through Selflessness and Obedience

We gain happiness and salvation not by blindly pursuing our own self and our own will. We gain salvation by submitting our will, indeed our very selves, to the will of God. We must lose ourselves to find ourselves.

The family by its very nature is an institution based upon righteous self-denial and sacrifice. It is not an individualistic or self-centered organization, but a highly cooperative and other-centered institution. Successful families require that men and women make substantial and long-term sacrifices of their time, money, and personal fulfillment in order to dedicate their efforts to rearing the next generation. Selfishness in any form or degree weakens the bonds that hold families together. The rise of selfishness in our society is the fundamental underlying trend that undermines families and makes successful marriages so difficult. Many today find it irrational to devote so much time and energy to the welfare of the next generation, but if this commitment is not deeply rooted in society, civilization will decline and perish, while children grow up in a moral wasteland, confused, unguided, and unloved.

Moreover, the sacrifices that fathers and mothers make for their children ultimately will result in the greatest possible happiness for those making the sacrifices. In all of human experience, there are no joys more tender, no love more sweet, no fulfillment higher than that found in the family. Those who honor the calling of righteous parenthood will find their souls refined, their hearts purified, and their minds enlightened by the most important lessons of life. They will rise to far greater heights of happiness than those who engage in the narrow and ultimately unsatisfying pursuit of self.

In Lehi's vision of the tree of life, he saw a strait and narrow path leading to the tree of life, which represented the love of God (see 1 Nephi 8:20; 11:21–22). The world at large is not interested in any moral path that is strait and narrow, but prefers its avenues to be as broad as possible. Latter-day Saints are often accused of narrow-mindedness or lack of tolerance and compassion because of our belief in following precise standards of moral behavior as set forth by God's prophets. Let us consider, therefore, what is meant by the strait and narrow path.



God has given His children commandments, laws, and revelations that define the pathway leading back into His presence. His laws and commandments are intended to bless us, to uplift us, and to bring us joy. They mark the path of safety amidst the storms and mists of mortal existence. This means that *the strait and narrow path is a path of divine love*, a path laid down by a God of perfect charity, whose only desire is to bless. To the degree that any human being strays from that path, he or she inevitably experiences inner conflict, distress, and loneliness. To leave the strait and narrow path is to leave the one path congruent with our own eternal nature. When we invite people to lay aside the things of the world and come unto Christ, we are inviting them to the one sure path that leads to lasting joy and inner peace.

To some the very idea of a strait and narrow path will seem intolerant of those who choose different paths. By holding up a divine ideal of what family ought to be, they claim we are guilty of intolerance toward those who choose other paths, other standards, other definitions of right and wrong. But is this really true?

The Shifting Definition of Tolerance

Until recently in our national history, tolerance referred to racial and religious non-discrimination. It meant civility in the political arena; in other words, respecting the right of others to express their views, even if we do not agree with them. It meant treating all people with decency and respect. Such tolerance is an important and vital part of our American heritage.

Today, however, the world is in danger of abandoning all sense of absolute right or wrong, all morality and virtue, replacing them with an all-encompassing “tolerance” that no longer means what it once meant. An extreme definition of tolerance is now widespread that implicitly or explicitly endorses the right of every person to choose their own morality, even their own “truth,” as though morality and truth were mere matters of personal preference. This extreme tolerance culminates in a refusal to recognize any fixed standards or draw moral distinctions of any kind. Few dare say no to the “almighty self” or suggest that some so-called “lifestyles” may be destructive, contrary to higher law, or simply wrong.

When tolerance is so inflated out of all proportions, it means the death of virtue, for the essence of morality is to draw clear distinctions between right and wrong. All virtue requires saying no firmly and courageously to all that is morally bankrupt.

Curiously enough, this new modern tolerance is often a one-way street. Those who practice it expect everyone to tolerate them in anything they say or do, but show no tolerance themselves toward those who express differing viewpoints or defend traditional morality. Indeed, their intolerance is often most barbed toward those of religious conviction. But let there be no misunderstanding or deception: the First Amendment right of free speech applies to religious speech as well as to other kinds of speech. Believers of all faiths have every right to participate in and share their

convictions in the public arena.

Now let us go one step further. Even in its original and correct connotation, tolerance is surely a secondary virtue in comparison with the far higher virtue of love. Certainly it is good to be tolerant of those who are different than we are, treating them with kindness and civility. But love, or charity, is the highest of all, and it is far better to genuinely love those with whom we differ. When we truly love all of God’s children in a Christlike way, we will desire to bring them unto Christ, the fountain of all happiness. This means proclaiming the truth, defending that which is right, and in a mild voice inviting all to walk the path of Christ. By defending the traditional family, Latter-day Saints bless all people whether others recognize it now or not.

So perfect and exalted was Christ’s love for God’s children that He took upon Himself the penalty for their sins, descending below all things in the Garden of Gethsemane and dying for us on the cross at Golgotha. Yet He never compromised virtue nor tolerated sin in the slightest degree (see D&C 1:31). He treated the woman taken in adultery with love and respect, putting her accusers to shame; nevertheless He said, “Go, and sin no more” (John 8:11). The Master abhorred sin, because *sin is the enemy of the human soul*.

God’s love is sometimes described as unconditional. It is true that God loves all of His children on earth no matter how often or how far they may stray. But while God’s love is all-encompassing, *His blessings are highly conditional*,

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including the very blessing of being able to feel and experience His love. The further human beings stray from the path of righteousness, the less they will be capable of feeling divine love, because it is conveyed into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that God loves us less when we stray, only that we, by our choices and actions, have distanced ourselves from His love. How wondrous, then, is the gift of repentance, by which we can be brought back into accord with His will and feel again of His love.

Regardless of what the future may hold, God has ordained that in the dispensation of the fullness of times, the parents of the Church will be given power to help save their children from the darkness around them.

Our Responsibility to Defend the Family

In the family proclamation, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles declare, “We warn that the disintegration

of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.”⁷ The Church is a small institution compared with the world at large. Nevertheless, the Latter-day Saints as a people should not underestimate the power of our example, nor our capacity to persuade public opinion, reverse negative trends, or invite seeking souls to enter the gate and walk the Lord’s chosen way. We ought to give our best efforts, in cooperation with like-minded persons and institutions, to defend the family and raise a voice of warning and of invitation to the world. The Lord expects us to do this, and in doing so to ignore the mocking and scorn of those in the great and spacious building, where is housed the pride of the world.

Regardless of what the future may hold, God has ordained that in the dispensation of the fullness of times, the parents of the Church will be given power to help save their children from the darkness around them. As the hearts of fathers and mothers turn to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents, we eventually will witness the rise of a generation refined and prepared to meet the Savior at His coming. The triumph of God’s kingdom in the latter days will be a triumph not only of the Church as an organization but of tens of thousands of individual families who by faith have overcome the world.

May we as members of the Church rise up and assume our divinely appointed role as a light to the nations. May we sacrifice and labor to rear a generation strong enough to resist the siren songs of popular culture, a generation filled with the Holy Ghost so that they may discern the difference between good and evil, between legitimate tolerance and moral surrender. May we arise in faith and in love so as to prepare the way for the great millennial reign of Christ, a day to come when in every village and city of the world, boys and girls will play in innocence, and every child of God know the peace of a happy home. ■

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NOTES

1. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Liahona* and *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129.
2. Susan B. Carter, et al., *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Millennial Edition, Vol. 1, 688–689.
3. 16.9 divorces per 1,000 married women ages 15 and older in 2008. See W. Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Marquardt, eds., *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America*, 2009, 75.
4. *America’s Family and Living Arrangements: 2009*, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Surveys, March 2009. See Table UC1. This source estimates 6.6 million cohabitating couples.
5. Brady E. Hamilton, et al., “Births: Preliminary Data for 2008,” *National Vital Statistics Reports* 58:16 (April 2010), 5.
6. James Lincoln Collier, *The Rise of Selfishness in America*, (1990), 246.
7. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” 129.